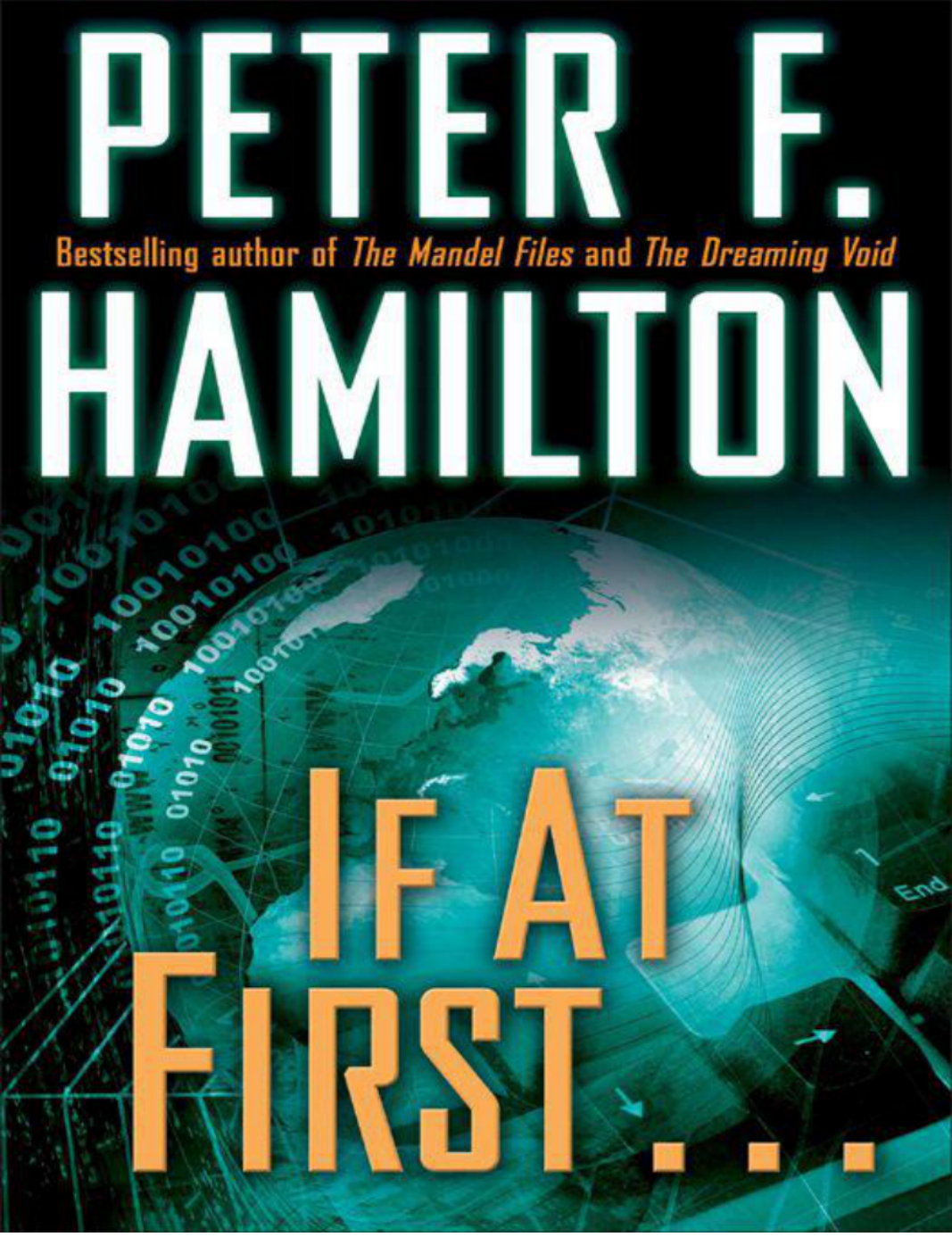
PETER F. HAMILTON

Bestselling author of *The Mandel Files* and *The Dreaming Void*



IF AT FIRST . . .

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Annotation

Peter F. Hamilton has proven himself a modern master of epic space opera, carrying the tradition of far-future empire building begun by Heinlein and Asimov into the new millennium. But Hamilton is also a master of the short story, and when he tackles one of science fiction's most enduring themes-time travel-the result is as provocative as it is entertaining.

It starts in 2007 with a break-in. The victim: Marcus Orthew, the financial and technological genius behind Orthanics, the computer company whose radical products have delivered a one-two punch to the industry, all but knocking PCs and Macs out of the ring. The perpetrator: a man obsessed with Orthew. Just another simple case of celebrity stalking—or so everyone assumes at first, including Metropolitan Police Chief Detective David Lanson. But when Lanson interviews the suspect, he makes a startling claim: Orthew is from the future. Or, rather, a future—a parallel timeline. Thus begins the ride of a lifetime for Lanson, as his pursuit of the facts tumbles him headlong down a rabbit hole—and the hunter finds himself hunted.

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Peter F. Hamilton
IF AT FIRST…

MY NAME IS David Lanson, and I was with the Metropolitan Police for twenty-seven years. When we got handed the Jenson case I was a chief detective, heading up my own team. Not bad going; from outside you'd think I was a standard careerist ticking off the days until retirement. You'd be wrong, I'd grown to hate the job with a passion. Back when I signed on the CID were real thief-takers, but by the time the Jenson case came up I was spending all my time filling in Risk Assessment forms. I'm not kidding, the paperwork was beyond parody. All good stuff for lawyers, but we were getting hammered in the press for truly dismal crime statistics, and hammered by the politicians for not meeting their stupid targets. No wonder public confidence in us had reached rock bottom; the only useful thing we did for the average citizen by then was to hand out official crime numbers for insurance claims.

I suppose that makes me sound bitter; but then that seems to be the fate of old men who're stuck in a job that's forever modernizing. The point of all this being, despite drowning in all that bureaucratic stupidity I reckoned I was quite a decent policeman. That is: I know when people are lying. In those twenty-seven years I'd heard it all, and I do mean all: desperate types who've made a mistake and then start sprouting bollocks to cover themselves, the genuine nutters who live in their own little world and believe every word they're saying, drunks and potheads trying to act sober, losers with pitiful excuses, real sick ones who are so cold and polite it makes my skin crawl. Listening to all that day in day out you soon learn to tell what's real and what isn't.

So anyway— We get the call from Marcus Orthew's solicitor that his security people are holding an intruder at his Richmond research center, and they'd appreciate a full investigation of the "situation." That was in 2007, and Orthew was a media and computer mogul then, at least that was the public perception; it wasn't until later I found out just how wide his commercial and technological interests were. His primary hardware company, Orthanics, had just started producing solid state blocks that were generations ahead of anything the opposition were doing, they didn't have hard drives or individual components, the entire computer was wrapped up inside a single hyperprocessor. It wiped the floor with PCs and Applemacs. He was always ahead of the game, Orthew; it was his original PCWs that blew Sinclair computers away at the start of the 1980s; everyone in my

generation went and bought an Orthanics PCW as their first computer.

But this break-in: I thought it was slightly odd the solicitor calling me rather than the company security office. Like I said, the longer you're in the game you develop a feeling for these things. I took Paul Mathews and Carmen Galloway with me, they were lieutenants on my team, good people, and slightly less bothered about all the paperwork flooding our office than me. Smart move, I guess; they'd probably make it farther than I was ever destined to go. Orthanics security were holding on to Toby Jenson, they'd found him breaking into one of the Richmond Center labs, which the CCTV footage confirmed. And I was right, there was more to it. We read Toby Jenson his rights, and uniform division hauled him off; that was when the solicitor told me he was a stalker, a twenty-four-karat obsessive. Marcus Orthew had known about him for years, Jenson had been following him 'round the globe, hacking into Orthew's systems, talking to people in his organization, on his domestic staff, ex-girlfriends, basically anyone who crossed his path; but they hadn't been able to do anything about him. Jenson was smart, there was never any activity they could take him to court for, he never got physically close, all he did was talk to people, and the hacking could never be proved in law. The Richmond break-in changed all that. As it was Orthew making the allegations, my boss told me to give it complete priority; I guess she was scared about what his magazines and satellite channels would do to the Met if we let it slide.

I went out to Jenson's house with Paul and Carmen. Jesus, you should have seen the bloody place: I mean it was out of a Hollywood serial killer film. Every room was filled with stuff on Orthew; thousands of pictures taken all over the world, company press releases dating back decades, filing cabinets full of newspaper clippings, articles, every whisper of gossip, records of his movements, maps with his houses and factories on them, copies of his magazines, tapes of interviews Jenson had made, City financial reports on the company. It was a cross between a shrine and a Marcus Orthew museum. It spooked the hell out of me. No doubt about it, Jenson was totally fixated on Orthew. Forensics had to hire a removal lorry to clear the place out.

I interviewed Jenson the next day, and that was when it started to get really weird. I'll tell you it as straight as I can remember, which is pretty much verbatim, I'm never ever going to forget that afternoon. First off, he wasn't upset that he'd been caught, more like resigned. Almost like a premier league footballer who's lost the Cup Final, you know: It's a blow but life goes on. The first thing he said was: "I should have realized. Marcus Orthew is a genius, he was bound to catch me out." Which is kind of ironic, really, isn't it? So I asked him

what exactly he thought he'd been caught out doing. Get this: He said, "I was trying to find where he was building his time machine." Paul and Carmen just laughed at him. To them it was a Sectioning case, pure and simple. Walk the poor bloke past the station doctor, get the certificate signed, lock him up in a padded room, and supply him with good drugs for the next thirty years. I thought more or less the same thing, too; we wouldn't even need to go to trial, but we were recording the interview, and all his delusions would help coax a signature out of the doc, so I asked him what made him think Orthew was building a time machine. Jenson said they went to school together, that's how he knew. Now, the thing is, I checked this later, and they actually did go to some boarding school in Lincolnshire. Well that's fair enough, obsessions can start very early, grudges, too; maybe some fight over a bar of chocolate spiraled out of control, and it'd been festering in Jenson's mind ever since. Jenson claimed otherwise. Marcus Orthew was the coolest kid in school, apparently. Didn't surprise me; from what I'd seen of him in interviews over the years he was one of the most urbane men on the planet. Women found that very attractive, you didn't have to look through Jenson's press cuttings to know that, Orthew's girlfriends were legendary, even the broadsheets reported them.

So how on earth did Jenson decide that the coolest kid in school had evolved into someone building a time machine? "It's simple," he told us earnestly. "When I was at school I got a cassette recorder for my twelfth birthday. I was really pleased with it, nobody else had one. Marcus saw it and just laughed. He snatched one of the cassettes off me, a C-90 I remember, and he said: *State of the art, huh, damn it's almost the same size as an iPod.*"

Which didn't make a lot of sense to me. Paul and Carmen had given up by then, bored, waiting for me to wrap it up. So? I prompted. "So," Jenson said patiently. "This was 1971. Cassettes *were* state of the art then. At the time I thought it was odd, that *iPod* was some foreign word; Marcus was already fluent in three languages, he'd throw stuff like that at you every now and then, all part of his laid-back image. It was one of those things that lingers in your mind. There was other stuff, too. The way he kept smiling every time Margaret Thatcher was on TV, like he knew something we didn't. When I asked him about it he just said one day you'll see the joke. I've got a good memory, Detective, very good. All those little details kept adding up over the years. But it was the iPod that finally clinched it for me. How in God's name could he know about iPods back in '71?"

Now I understand, I told him: time machine. Jenson gave me this look, like he was pitying me. "But Marcus was twelve, just like me," he said. "We'd been at prep school together since we were eight, and

he already possessed the kind of suavity men don't normally get until they're over thirty, damnit he even unnerved the teachers. So how did an eight-year-old get to go time traveling? That was in 1967, NASA hadn't even reached the moon then, we'd only just gotten transistors. Nobody in '67 could build a time machine."

But that's the thing with time machines, I told him. They travel back from the future. I knew I'd get stick from Paul and Carmen for that one, but I couldn't help it. Something about Jenson's attitude was bothering me, that old policeman's instinct. He didn't present himself as delusional. Okay, that's not a professional shrink's opinion, but I knew what I was seeing. Jenson was an ordinary nerdish programmer, a self-employed contractor working from home, more recently from his laptop as he chased Orthew 'round the world. Something was powering this obsession, and the more I heard the more I wanted to get to the root of it. "Exactly," Jenson said. His expression changed to tentative suspicion as he gazed at me. "At first I thought an older Marcus had come back in time and given his young self a 2010 encyclopedia. It's the classic solution, after all, even though it completely violates causality. But knowledge alone doesn't explain Marcus's attitude; something changed an ordinary little boy into a charismatic, confident, wise fifty-year-old trapped in an eight-year-old body."

And you worked out the answer, I guessed. Jenson produced a secretive smile. "Information," he said. "That's how he does it. That's how he's always done it. This is how it must have been first time 'round: Marcus grows up naturally and becomes a quantum theorist, a cosmologist, whatever … He's a genius, we know that. We also know you can't send mass back through time, wormhole theory disallows it. You can't open a rift through time big enough to take an atom back a split second, the amount of energy to do that simply doesn't exist in the universe. So Marcus must have worked out how to send raw information instead, something that has zero mass. Do you see? He sent his own mind back to the 1960s. All his memories, all his knowledge packaged up and delivered to his earlier self; no wonder his confidence was off the scale."

I had to send Paul out then. He couldn't stop laughing, which drew a hurt pout from Jenson. Carmen stayed, though she was grinning broadly; Jenson beat any of the current sitcoms on TV for chuckles. All right then, I said, so Orthew sent his grown-up memory back to his kid self, and you're trying to find the machine that does it. Why is that, Toby?

"Are you kidding?" he grunted. "I want to go back myself."

Seems reasonable, I admitted. Is that why you broke into the Richmond lab?

“Richmond was one of two possibles,” he said. “I’ve been monitoring the kind of equipment he’s been buying for the last few years. After all, he’s approaching fifty.”

“What’s the relevance of that?” Carmen interjected.

“He’s a bloke,” Jenson said. “You must have read the gossip about him and girls. There have been hundreds: models, actresses, society types.”

“That always happens with rich men,” she told him, “you can’t base an allegation on that, especially not the one you’re making.”

“Yes but that first time ’round he was just a physicist,” Jenson said. “There’s no glamour or money in that. Now, though, he knows how to build every post-2000 consumer item at age eight. He can’t *not* be a billionaire. This time ’round he was worth a hundred million by the time he was twenty. With that kind of money you can do anything you want. And I think I know what that is. You only have to look at his genetics division. His electronics are well in advance of anything else on the planet, but what his labs are accomplishing with DNA sequencing and stem cell research is phenomenal. They have to have started with a baseline of knowledge decades ahead of anybody else. Next time he goes back he’ll introduce into the 1970s the techniques he’s developed this time ’round. We’ll probably have rejuvenation by 1990. Think what that’ll make him, a time-traveling immortal. I’m not going to miss out on that if I can help it.”

I don’t get it, I told him. If Orthew goes back and gives us all immortality in the ’90s, you’ll be a part of it, we all will. Why go to these criminal lengths?

“I don’t know if it is time travel,” Jenson said forlornly. “Not actual traveling backward, I still don’t see how that gets around causality. It’s more likely he kicks sideways.”

I don’t get that, I said. What do you mean?

“A parallel universe,” Jenson explained. “Almost identical to this one. Generating the wormhole might actually allow for total information transfer, the act of opening it creates a xerox copy of this universe as it was in 1967. Maybe. I’m not certain what theory his machine is based on, and he certainly isn’t telling anyone.”

I looked at Carmen. She just shrugged. Okay, thank you for your statement, I told Jenson, we’ll talk again later.

“You don’t believe me,” he accused me.

Obviously we’ll have to run some checks, I replied. “Tape 83-7B,” he growled at me. “That’s your proof. And if it isn’t at the Richmond Center, then he’s building it at Ealing. Check there if you want the truth.”

Which I did. Not immediately. While Carmen and Paul sorted out Jenson’s next interview with the criminal psychologist, I went down to

forensics. They found the videotape labeled 83-7B for me, which had a big red star on the label. It was the recording of a kids' show from '83: *Saturday Breakfast with Bernie*. Marcus Orthew was on it to promote his Nanox computer, which was tied in to a national school computer learning syllabus for which Orthanics had just won the contract. It was the usual zany rubbish, with minor celebrities being dunked in blue and purple goo at the end of their slot. Marcus Orthew played along like a good sport. But it was what happened when he came out from under the dripping nozzle that sent a shiver down my spine. Wiping the goo off his face he grinned and said: "That's got to be the start of reality TV." *In 1983?* It was Orthew's satellite channel that inflicted *Big Brother* on us in 1995.

Toby Jenson's computer contained a vast section on the Orthanics Ealing facility. Eight months ago, it had taken delivery of twelve specialist cryogenic superconductor cells, the power rating higher than the ones used by Boeing's shiny new electroramjet spaceplane. I spent a day thinking about it while the interview with Toby Jenson played over and over in my mind. In the end it was my gut police instinct I went with. Toby Jenson had convinced me. I put my whole so-called career on the line and applied for a warrant. I figured out later that was where I went wrong. Guess which company supplied and maintained the Home Office IT system? The request must have triggered red rockets in Orthew's house. According to the security guards at the gate, Marcus Orthew arrived twelve minutes before us. Toby Jenson had thoughtfully indicated in his files the section he believed most suitable to be used for the construction of a time machine.

He was right, and I'd been right about him. The machine was like the core of the CERN accelerator, a warehouse packed full of high-energy physics equipment. Right at the center, with all the fat wires and conduits and ducts focusing on it, was a dark spherical chamber with a single oval opening. The noise screeching out from the hardware set my teeth on edge, Paul and Carmen clamped their hands over their ears. Then Carmen pointed and screamed. I saw a giant brick of plastic explosives strapped to an electronics cabinet. Now I knew what to look for, I saw others. Some were sitting on the superconductor cells. So that's what it's like being caught inside an atom bomb.

Marcus Orthew was standing inside the central chamber. Sort of. He was becoming translucent. I yelled at the others to get out, and ran for the chamber. I reached it as he faded from sight. Then I was inside. My memories started to unwind, playing back my life. *Very* fast. I only recognized tiny sections amid the blur of color and emotion: the high-speed chase that nearly killed me, the birth of my son, Dad's funeral,

the church where I got married, university. Then the playback started to slow, and I remembered that day when I was about eleven, in the park, when Kenny Mattox, our local bully, sat on my chest and made me eat the grass cuttings.

I spluttered as the soggy mass was pushed down past my teeth, crying out in shock and fear. Kenny laughed and stuffed some more grass in. I gagged and started to puke violently. Then he was scrambling off in disgust. I lay there for a while, getting my breath back and spitting out grass. I was eleven years old, and it was 1968. It wasn't the way I would've chosen to arrive in the past, but in a few months Neil Armstrong would set foot on the moon, then the Beatles would break up.

What I should have done, of course, was patented something. But what? I wasn't a scientist or even an engineer, I can't tell you the chemical formula for Viagra, I didn't know the mechanical details of an air bag. There were everyday things I knew about, icons that we can't survive without, the kind that rake in millions; but would you like to try selling a venture capitalist the idea of Lara Croft five years before the first pocket calculator hits the shops? I did that. I was actually banned from some banks in the City.

So I fell back on the easiest thing in the world. I became a singer-songwriter. Songs are ridiculously easy to remember even if you can't recall the exact lyrics. Remember my first big hit in '78, "Shiny Happy People"? I always was a big REM fan. You've never heard of them? Ah well, sometimes I wonder what the band members are doing this time around. "Pretty in Pink," "Teenage Kicks," "The Unforgettable Fire," "Solsbury Hill"? They're all the same; that fabulous oeuvre of mine isn't quite as original as I make out. And I'm afraid Live Aid wasn't actually the flash of inspiration I always said, either. But the music biz has given me a bloody good life. Every album I've released has been number one on both sides of the Atlantic. That brings in money. A lot of money. It also attracts girls, I mean I never really believed the talk about backstage excess in the time I had before, but trust me here, the public never gets to hear the half of it. I thought it was the perfect cover. I've been employing private agencies to keep an eye on Marcus Orthew since the mid-'70s, several of his senior management team are actually on my payroll. Hell, I even bought shares in Orthogene, I knew it was going to make money, though I didn't expect quite so much money. I can afford to do whatever the hell I want; and the beauty of that is nobody pays any attention to rock stars or how we blow our cash, everyone thinks we're talentless junked-up kids heading for a fall. That's what you think has happened now, isn't it? The fall. Well, you're wrong about that.

See, I made exactly the same mistake as poor old Toby Jenson: I

underestimated Marcus. I didn't think it through. My music made ripples, big ripples. Everyone knows me, I'm famous right across the globe as a one-off supertalent. There's only one other person in this time who knows those songs aren't original: Marcus. He knew I came after him. And he hasn't quite cracked the rejuvenation treatment yet. It's time for him to move on, to make his fresh start again in another parallel universe.

That's why he framed me. Next time around he's going to become our god. It's not something he's going to share with anyone else.

* * *

I LOOKED 'ROUND the interview room, which had an identical layout to the grubby cube just down the hall where I had interviewed Toby Jenson last time around. Paul Mathews and Carmen Galloway were giving me blank-faced looks, buttoning back their anger at being dragged into the statement. I couldn't quite get used to Paul with a full head of hair, but Orthogene's follicle treatment is a big earner for the company; everyone in this universe uses it.

I tried to bring my hands up to them, an emphasis to the appeal I was making, but the handcuffs were chained to the table. I glanced down as the metal pulled at my wrists. After the samples had been taken the forensics team had washed the blood off my hands, but I couldn't forget it, there'd been so much; the image was actually stronger than the one I kept of Toby Jenson. Yet I'd never seen those girls until I woke up to find their bodies in the hotel bed with me. The paramedics didn't even try to revive them.

"Please," I implored. "Paul, Carmen, you have to believe me." And I couldn't even say *for old times' sake*.

Excerpt from *Mindstar Rising*

Read on for an excerpt from

Mindstar Rising

one of two novels contained in

The Mandel Files, Volume 1 by Peter F. Hamilton,

coming from Del Rey Books.

1

Meteorites fell through the night sky like a gentle sleet of icefire, their sharp scintillations slashing ebony overload streaks across the image Greg Mandel's photon amp was feeding into his optic nerves.

He was hanging below a Westland ghost wing, five hundred metres above the Purser's Hills, due west of Kettering. Spiralling down. Wind strummed the membrane, producing near-subliminal bass harmonics.

Ground zero was a small crofter's cottage; walls of badly laid raw stone swamped with some olive-green creeper, big scarlet flowers. It had a thatched roof, reeds rotting and congealing, caked in tidemark ripples of blue-green fungal growths. A two-metre-square solar-cell strip had been pinned on top.

Greg landed a hundred metres downslope from the cottage, propeller spinning furiously to kill his forward speed. He stopped inside three metres. The Westland was one of the best military microlights ever built – lightweight, highly manoeuvrable, silent, with a low radar-visibility profile. Greg had flown them on fifteen missions in Turkey, and their reliability had been one hundred per cent. All British Army covert tactical squads had been equipped with them. He'd hate to use anything else. They'd gone out of production when the People's Socialism Party came to power, twelve years previously. A victim of the demilitarization realignment programme, the Credit Crash, the Warming, nationalization, industrial collapse. This one was fifteen years old, and still functioned like a dream.

A time display flashed in the bottom right corner of the photon amp image, spectral yellow digits: 21:17:08. Greg twisted the Westland's retraction catch, and the translucent wing folded with a graceful rustle. He anchored it with a skewer harpoon. There'd be no danger of it blowing away now. The hills suffered frequent twister-gusts, and this was March, England's rainy season: squalls abounded. Gabriel hadn't cautioned him about the wing in her briefing: but Greg always followed routine, engrained by sergeant majors, and way too much experience.

He studied the terrain, the amp image grey and blue, smoky. There were no surprises; the Earth-resource satellite pictures Royan had pirated for him were three months old, but nothing had changed. The area was isolated, grazing land, marginally viable. Nobody spent money on barns and roads up here. It was perfect for someone who wanted to drop out of sight, a nonentity wasteland.

Greg heard a bell tinkling from the direction of the cottage, high-pitched and faint. He keyed the amp to infrared, and upped the

magnification. A big rosy blob resolved into a goat with a broad collar dangling a bell below its neck.

He began to walk towards the cottage. The meteorites had gone, sweeping away to the east. Not proper shooting stars after all, then. Some space station's waste dump; or an old rocket stage, dragged down from its previously stable discard-orbit by Earth's hot expanded atmosphere.

'At twenty-one nineteen GMT the dog will start its run towards you,' Gabriel had said when she briefed him. 'You will see it first when it comes around the end of the wall on the left of the cottage.'

Greg looked at the wall; the ablative decay which ruled the rest of the croft had encroached here as well, reducing it to a low moss-covered ridge ringing a small muddy yard.

A yellow blink: 21:19:00.

The dog was a Rottweiler, heavily modified for police riot-assault duty, which was expensive. A crofter with a herd of twenty-five llamas couldn't afford one, and certainly had no right owning one. Its front teeth had been replaced by mono-lattice silicon fangs, eight centimetres long; the jaw had been reprofiled to a blunt hammerhead to accommodate them; both eyes were implants, retinas beefed up for night sight. One aspect Gabriel hadn't mentioned was the *speed* of the bloody thing.

Greg brought his Walther eight-shot up, the sighting laser glaring like a rigid lightning bolt in the photon amp's image. He got off two fast shots, maser pulses that drilled the Rottweiler's brain. The steely legs collapsed, sending it tumbling, momentum skidding it across the nettle-clumped grass. In death it snarled at him, jaws open, eyes wide, crying blood.

He walked past, uncaring. The Walther's condensers whined away on the threshold of audibility, recharging.

'At twenty-one twenty and thirteen seconds GMT, the cottage door will open. Edwards will look both ways before coming out. He will be carrying a pump-action shot-gun – only three cartridges, though.'

Greg flattened himself against the cottage wall, feeling the leathery creeper leaves compress against his back. The scarlet flowers had a scent similar to honeysuckle, strong sugar.

21:20:13.

The weather-bleached wooden door creaked.

Greg's espersense perceived Edwards hovering indecisively on the step, his mind a weak ruby glow, thought currents flowing slowly, concern and suspicion rising.

'He'll turn right, away from you.'

Edwards boot squelched in the mud of the yard, two steps. The

shot-gun was held out in front, his finger pressed lightly on the trigger.

Greg came away from the wall, flicking the Walther to longburn, lining it up. Edwards was a bulky figure dressed in filthy denim trousers and a laddered chunky-knit sweater; neck craning forwards, peering through the moonlit gloom. He'd aimed the shot-gun at the ramshackle stone shed at the bottom of the yard.

The goat bleated, tugging at its leash.

Edwards was somehow aware of the presence behind him. His back stiffened, mind betraying a hot burst of alarm and fear to Greg's espersense. He tightened his grip on the shotgun, ready to spin round and blast away wildly.

'Drop it,' Greg said softly.

Edwards sighed, his shoulders relaxing. He bent to put the shot-gun down, resting its barrel on a stone, saving it from the mud. A man who knew weapons.

'OK, you can turn now.'

His face was thin, bearded, hazel eyes yellowed. He looked at Greg, taking in the matt-black combat leathers, slim metallic-silver band bisecting his face, unwavering Walther. Edwards knew he was going to die, but the terrified acceptance was flecked with puzzlement. 'Why?' he asked.

'Absolution.'

He didn't get it, they never did. His death was a duty, ordered by guilt.

Greg had learnt all about duty from the Army, relying on his squad mates, their equal dependence on him. It was a bond closer than family, overriding everything – laws, conventions, morals. Civvies like Edwards never understood. When all other human values had gone, shattered by violence, there was still duty. The implicit trust of life. And Greg had failed Royan. Miserably.

Greg fired. Edwards' mouth gaped as the maser beam struck his temple, his eyes rolling up as he fell forwards. He splashed into the thin layer of mud. Dead before he hit.

Greg holstered the Walther, breath hissing out between clenched teeth. He walked back down the hill to the Westland without giving the body another glance. Behind him, the goat's bell began to clang.

* * *

He refused to think about the kill while the Westland cruised over the countryside, his mind an extension of the guido, iced silicon, confirming landmarks, telling his body when to shift balance. It

would've been too easy to brood in the ghost wing's isolated segment of the universe, guilt and depression inevitable.

Rutland Water was in front of him, a Y-shaped reservoir six and a half kilometres long nestling in the snug dark valleys of the county's turbulent rolling landscape. A pale oyster flame of jejune moonlight shone across the surface. Greg came in over the broad grass-slope dam at the western end. He kept low, skimming the water. Straight ahead was the floating village; thirty-odd log rafts, each supporting a plain wooden cabin, like something out of a Western frontier settlement. They were lashed together by a spiderweb of cables, forming a loose circle around the old limnological tower, a thick concrete shaft built before the reservoir was filled.

He angled towards the biggest cabin, compensating for the light gusts with automatic skill. At five metres out he flared the wing sharply. Surging air plucked at his combat leathers; his feet touched the coarse overlapping planks which made up the roof, legs running, carrying him up towards the apex as the propeller blurred. He stopped with a metre to spare. The tan, scrumpylike odour of drying water-fruit permeated the air, reassuring in its familiarity.

The Westland's membrane folded.

'Greg?'

He watched Nicole's bald head rise above the gable end. 'Here.' He shrugged out of the harness.

She came up the ladder on to the roof, a black ex-Navy marine-adept dressed in a functional mauve diving bikini. He couldn't remember her ever wearing anything else. Even in the moonlight her water-resilient skin glistened from head to toe; she looked tubby, but not overweight, her shape dictated by an all-over insulating layer of subcutaneous fat, protecting her from the cold of deep water.

'How did it go?'

'All sorted, no messing,' he replied curtly.

Nicole nodded.

Two more marine-adepts swarmed briskly up the ladder and took charge of the Westland. Greg appreciated that, no fuss, no chatter. Most of the floating village's marine-adepts were ex-Navy, they understood.

They'd colonized the reservoir around the time Greg moved into his chalet on the shore, seeding and harvesting their gene-tailored water-fruit. Their only concession to the convulsions of the PSP years was to store Greg's military gear for him, and, very occasionally, provide sanctuary for an activist on the run from the People's Constables.

'I'll be back tomorrow,' Greg told Nicole as he climbed into his ancient rowing boat. When the neurohormone hangover had gone,

when the memory of Edwards had faded, when he felt human again.

She untied the pannier and tossed it into the boat after him. ‘Sure, Greg. Take care.’

* * *

Back on land he headed for the pub to forget the kill. The Army had taught him how to handle that as well. How to suspend human feelings in combat, to refuse the blame for all the deaths, the pain, suffering, horror. Greg had never woken screaming like others in the regiment had.

He knew what he needed, the release which came from drink and women, gluttoning out, sluicing away the memory of Edwards in a wash of basement-level normality.

He had a good feeling as he walked into the Wheatsheaf at Edith Weston; esper intuition or old-fashioned instinct, it didn’t matter which, the result was the same. Static-charged anticipation. He opened the taproom door grinning.

The Wheatsheaf’s landlord, Angus, had come up trumps; his new barmaid was a tall, strapping lass, twenty years old with a heart-shaped face, wearing her thick red hair combed back from her forehead. She was dressed in a long navy-blue skirt and purple cap-sleeve T-shirt. A deep scoop neck showed off the heavily freckled slope of her large breasts to perfection.

Eleanor Broady. Greg stored the name as she pulled him a pint of Ruddles County, topping it with a shot of Angus’s homemade whisky. It lasted longer that way, he couldn’t afford to knock back pints all night.

Greg sat back and admired her in the guttering light of the oil lamps. The Wheatsheaf was a run of the mill rural pub, which reverted true to the nineteen-hundreds ideal with the demise of the big brewery conglomerates. Flash trash fittings melting away surprisingly fast once mains electricity ended and beer had to be hand-drawn from kegs again. Either relaxing or monumentally dull according to individual sensibilities. Greg liked it. There were no demands on him in the Wheatsheaf.

He was wedged in between a group of local farm workers and some of the lads from the timber mill, billeted in the village’s old RAF base. The resident pair of warden dodgers were doing their nightly round, hawking a clutch of dripping rainbow trout they’d lifted from the reservoir.

Eleanor was a prize draw for male attention. Slightly timid from first-night nerves, but coping with the banter well enough.

Greg weighed up her personality, figuring how to make his play. Confidence gave him a warm buzz. He was seventeen years older, but with the edge his espersense gave him that shouldn't be a problem. What amused her, topics to steer clear of, he could see them a mile off. She'd believe they were soul twins before the night was out.

Her father came in at eleven thirty. The conversation chopped off dead. He was in dungarees, a big stained crucifix stitched crudely on the front. People stared; kibbutzniks didn't come into pubs, not ever.

Eleanor paled behind the bar, but stood her ground. Her father walked over to her, ignoring everybody, flickering yellow light catching the planes of his gaunt, angular face.

'You'll come home with me,' he said quietly, determined. 'We'll make no fuss.'

Eleanor shook her head, mute.

'Now.'

Angus came up beside her. 'The lady doesn't want to go.' His voice was weary but calm. No pub argument was beyond Angus; he knew them all, how to deal with each. Disposal expert.

'You belong with us,' said her father. 'You share our bread. We taught you better.'

'Listen—' Angus began, sweet reason.

'No. She comes with me. Or perhaps you will recompense us for her schooling? Grade four in animal husbandry, she is. Did she not tell you? Can you afford that?'

'I worked for it,' Eleanor said. 'Every day I worked for it. Never ending.'

Greg sensed how near to tears she was. Part of him was fascinated with the scene, it was surreal, or maybe Shakespearian, Victorian. Logic and lust urged him up.

Angus saw him closing on the bar and winced.

Greg gave him a wan reassuring smile – no violence, promise.

His imagination pictured his gland, a slippery black lens of muscle nestled at the centre of his brain, flexing rhythmically, squirting out milky liquid. Actually, it was nothing like that, but the psychosis was mild enough, harmless. Some Mindstar Brigade veterans had much weirder hallucinations.

The neurohormones started to percolate through his synapses, altering and enhancing their natural functions. His perception of the taproom began to alter, the physical abandoning him, leaving only people. They were their thoughts, tightly woven streamers of ideas, memories, emotions, interacting, fusing and budding. Coldly beautiful.

'Go home,' he told Eleanor's father.

The man was a furnace of anger and righteousness. Indignation blooming at the non-believer's impudence. 'This is not your concern,'

he told Greg.

'Nor is she yours, not any more,' Greg replied. 'No longer your little girl. She makes her own choices now.'

'God's girl!'

It would've been so easy to thump the arrogant bastard. A deluge of mayhem strobed through Greg's mind, the whole unarmed combat manual on some crazy mnemonic recall, immensely tempting. He concentrated hard on the intransigent mind before him, domination really wasn't his suit, too difficult and painful.

'Go *home*.' He pushed the order, clenching his jaw at the effort.

The man's thoughts shrank from his meddling insistence, cohesion broken. Faith-suppressed reactions, the animal urge to lash out, fists pounding, feet kicking, boiled dangerously close to the surface.

Greg thrust them back into the subconscious, knowing his nails would be biting into his palms at the exertion.

The father flung a last imploring glance to a daughter who was genuinely loved in a remote, filtered manner. Rejection triggered the final humiliation, and he fled, his soul keening, eternal hatred sworn. Greg sensed his own face reflected in the agitated thoughts, distorted to demonic preconceptions. Then he was gone.

The taproom slowly rematerialized. The gland's neurohormones were punishing his brain. He steadied himself on the bar.

There were knowing grins which he fended off with a sheepish smile. Forced. A low grumble of conversation returned, cut with snickers. An entire generation's legend born, this night would live for ever.

Eleanor was trembling in reaction, Angus's arm around her shoulder, strictly paternal. She insisted she was all right, wanted to carry on, please.

Greg was shown her wide sunny smile for the first time, an endearing combination of gratitude and shyness. He didn't have to buy another drink all night.

* * *

'Kibbutzes always seemed a bit of a contradiction in terms to me,' Greg said. 'Christian Marxists. A religious philosophy of dignified individuality, twinned with state oppression. Not your obvious partnership.' He and Eleanor were walking down the dirt track to his chalet in Berrybut Spinney, a couple of kilometres along the shore from Edith Weston. The old time-share estate's nightly bonfire glimmered through the black trees ahead, shooting firefly sparks high into the cloudless night. A midnight zephyr was rucking the surface of

Rutland Water, wavelets lapping on the mud shallows. He could hear the smothered-waterfall sound from the discharge pipes as the reservoir was filled by the pumping stations on the Welland and Nene, siphoning off the March floodwater. The water level had been low this Christmas, parched farmland placing a massive demand for irrigation. Thousands of square metres of grass and weeds around the shore that'd grown up behind the water's summer retreat were slowly drowning under its return. As the rotting vegetation fermented it gave off a gas which smelt of rancid eggs and cow shit. It lasted for six weeks each year.

'Not much of either in a kibbutz,' Eleanor said, 'just work. God, it was squalid, medieval. We were treated like people-machines, everything had to be done by hand. Their idea of advanced machinery was the plough which the shire horses pulled. God's will. Like hell!'

Greg nodded sympathetically, he'd seen the inside of a kibbutz. She was chattering now, a little nervous. The restrictive doctrine that'd dominated her childhood had stunted the usual pattern of social behaviour, leaving her slightly unsure, and slightly turned on by new-found freedom.

Greg felt himself getting high on expectation. He was growing impatient to reach the chalet, and bed with that fantastic-looking body. Edwards' face was already indistinct, monochrome, falling away. Even the neurohormone hangover had evaporated.

The tall ash and oak trees of Berrybut Spinney had died years ago, unable to survive the Warming. They'd been turned into gigantic gazebos for the cobaea vines Greg and the other estate residents had planted around their broad buttress roots, dangling huge cascades of purple and white trumpet-flowers from stark skeletal boughs.

He'd spent long hours renovating the estate for the first three years after he moved in, putting in new plants – angel trumpets, figs, ficus, palms, lilies, silk oaks, cedars, even a small orange grove at the rear: a hurried harlequin quilt thrown over the brown fungal rot of decay. The first two years after the temperature peaked were the worst. Grass survived, of course, and some evergreen trees, but the sudden year-round heat wiped out entire ecological systems right across the country. Arable land suffered the least; farms, and the new kibbutzes, adapted readily enough, switching to new varieties of crops and livestock. But that still left vast tracts of native countryside and forests and city parks and village greens looking like battlefields scoured by some apocalyptic chemical weapon.

Repairs were uncoordinated, a patchwork of gross contrasts. It made travelling interesting, though.

Greg and Eleanor emerged from the spinney into a rectangular clearing which sloped down to the water. The dying bonfire

illuminated a semicircle of twenty small chalets, and a big stone building at the crest.

'You live here?' Eleanor asked, in a very neutral tone.

'Yes,' he agreed cautiously. The chalets had been built by an ambitious time-share company in conjunction with a golf course running along the back of the spinney, and a grandiose clubhouse/hotel perched between the two. But the whole enterprise was suddenly bumped out of business thanks to the PSP's one-home law. The chalets were commandeered, the golf course returned to arable land, and the hotel transformed into thirty accommodation modules.

Greg always thought the country had been bloody lucky the PSP never got round to a one-room law. The situation had become pretty drastic as the oceans started to rise. The polar melt plateaued eventually, but not before it displaced two million people in England alone.

'I never asked,' she said. 'What is it you do?'

He chuckled. 'Greg Mandel's Investigative Services, at your service.'

'Investigative services? You mean, like a private detective? Angus told me you had a gland.'

'That's right. Of course it was nothing formal in the PSP decade. I didn't go legit until after the Second Restoration.'

'Why not?'

'Public ordinance number five seven five nine, oblique stroke nine two. By order of the President: no person implanted with a psi-enhancement gland may utilize their psi ability for financial gain. Not that many people could afford a private eye anyway. Not with Leopold Armstrong's nineteenth-century ideology screwing up the economy. Bastard. I was also disbarred from working in any State enterprise, and social security was a joke, the PSP apparatchiks had taken it over, head to toe, by the time I was demobbed. Tell you, they didn't like servicemen, and Mindstar veterans were an absolute no-go zone. The Party was running scared of us. As well they might.'

'How did you manage?'

'I had my Army pension for a couple of years after demob.' He shrugged. 'The PSP cancelled that soon enough. Fifth Austerity Act, if I recall rightly. I got by. Rutland's always had an agriculture-based economy. There's plenty of casual work to pick up on the farms, and the citrus groves were a boon; that and a few cash-only cases each year, it was enough.'

Her face was solemn. 'I never even saw any money until I was thirteen.'

He put his arm round her shoulder, giving a little reassuring shake. 'All over now.'

She smiled with haunted eyes, wanting to believe. His arm remained.

'Here we are,' he said, 'number six,' and blipped the lock.

The chalet's design paid fleeting homage to the ideal of some ancient Alpine hunting lodge, an overhanging roof all along the front creating a tiny veranda-cum-porch. But its structure lacked genuine Alpine ruggedness: prefab sections which looked like stout red-bark logs from the outside were now rotting badly, the windows had warped under the relentless assault of the new climate's heat and humidity, there was no air-conditioning, and the slates moulted at an alarming rate in high winds. The sole source of electricity was a solar-cell strip which Greg had pasted to the roof. However, the main frame was sound; four by four hardwood timber, properly seasoned. He could never understand why that should be, perhaps the building inspectors had chosen that day to put in an appearance.

The biolum strip came on revealing a lounge area with a sturdy oak-top bar separating it from a minute kitchen alcove at the rear. Its built-in furniture was compact, all light pine. Wearing thin, Greg acknowledged, following Eleanor's questing gaze. Entropy digging its claws in.

The corners of her lips tugged up. 'Nice. At Egleton, there'd be five of us sharing a room this size. You live here alone?'

'Yeah. The British Legion found it for me. Good people, volunteers. At least they cared, did what they could. And it's all paid for, even if it is falling down around me.'

'They were bad times, weren't they, Greg? I never really saw much of it. But there were the rumours, even in a kibbutz.'

'We rode it out, though. This country always does, somehow. That's our strength, in the genes, no matter how far down we fall, we're never out.'

'And you don't mind?'

'Mind what?'

'Me. I was in a kibbutz, that made me a card carrier.'

His arms went round her, hands resting lightly on her buttocks. Faces centimetres apart. Her nose was petite and pointed. 'Only by default. Nobody chooses their parents, and I'd say you un-chose yours pretty convincingly tonight.' His nose touched hers, rubbing gently.

She grinned, shy again.

The bedroom was on his right, behind a sliding door. A tiny pine-panelled room which was nearly filled by a huge double bed, there was a half-metre gap between the mattress and the walk.

Eleanor flicked him a quick appraising look, and her grin became slyer, lips twitching. Greg leant forward and kissed her.

He cheated with her, just as he'd done with all the others. His

espersense was alert for exactly the right moment. It came a minute into the kiss; his hands found the hem of her T-shirt and he was pulling it off over her head, muffling her giggles. The long skirt and silky panties followed quickly.

Her figure was just as spectacular as his imagination had painted it for him. Eleanor's years at the kibbutz had toughened her, more so than most of the girls he had. He found that erotic; her flat, slightly muscular belly, wide hips, broad, powerful shoulders, all loaded with athletic promise.

Greg's own clothes came off in a fast heated tussle, and they moved on to the bed.

It lasted for an age, building slow. With his eyes he watched the blue and black shadows flow across her smooth damp skin as she stretched and twisted below his hands. With his mind he sensed cold shooting stars igniting along the glistening trail left by the tip of his tongue, then fire along her nerves into her brain, adding to the glow of arousal. He saw what excited her, the words she wanted to hear; then exploited the discoveries, whispering secret fantasies into her ear, guiding her into the permutations she'd never dared ask from a partner before.

After the initial astonishment of making love to someone who not only shared her desires but actually relished them, Eleanor shook loose any lingering restraint. Greg laughed in delight as she let her enthusiasm run riot, and told her how she could repay him.

When he asked, she rose up in the way he loved, poised above him, light from the slumbering bonfire licking at her flesh, deepening her mystique. His hands finally found her breasts. She grinned, seeing his weakness, and played on it, drawing out the poignancy before she twined her legs around him, and pulled herself down. Her mind became almost dazzlingly bright as she used him to bring herself to orgasm, all coherency overwhelmed by animal instinct.

Greg let go of Edwards and duty and guilt, and concentrated solely on inflaming Eleanor still further.

2

Julia Evans sat at the dresser in her bedroom while the maid brushed daytime knots out of her long chestnut hair. It had to be done every night; she hadn't allowed her hair to be cut for years, and now it hung almost down to her waist. Her best feature, everyone said, striking.

She studied her face in the mirror, plump cheeked and bland, wearing a slightly sorrowful expression. It wasn't an ugly face, by any means. But at seventeen some allure really ought to be evolving.

Access Vanity#Twelve, she told her bioware processor implant silently. At least she had had a sense of humour when she began this memory sequence.

A mirage of her own face, six months younger, unfurled behind her eyes. She compared it to the one in the mirror. There was some change. A burning-off of puppy fat, her cheeks were rounder then. Fractionally.

There had been a time, a couple of months back, when she'd considered *plastique*, but eventually shied away. Having herself altered to match some channel-starlet ideal would be the ultimate admission of defeat. As long as there was still some development there was hope. Perhaps she was being impatient. But how wonderful it would be to make the boys ogle lustily.

Commit Vanity#Twenty-five. The mirror image, with all its melancholia.

'Thank you, Adela,' she said.

The maid nodded primly, and made one final stroke with the brush before departing, Julia watched her go in the mirror, some deep instinct objecting to ordering people around like cattle. But it was an instinct which was nearly dead, the Swiss boarding school had seen to that. Besides, Adela wasn't one of the grudging ones. At twenty-two years of age she was close enough in years for Julia to feel comfortable with her; and she was certainly loyal enough – to the extent of sharing Wilholm Manor's considerable quantity of below-stairs gossip.

Julia shrugged out of her robe and flopped down on the big circular bed, stretching luxuriously on the apricot silk sheets. The room was huge, so much empty space, and all her own. So very different to the little stone burrow she'd lived in for the first ten years of her life at the First Salvation Church warren. Space was undoubtedly the best part of being rich.

The bedroom was a celebration of opulent decadence, with its satin rose ceiling, thick pile carpet, walk-through wardrobes, a

marbled bathroom. It was a feminine room; a *boudoir*, foreign and exotic.

She'd spent a fortnight with an increasingly harried interior designer selecting exactly the style she wanted. A distant memory of an old memox video-cartridge, a costume romance of handsome dukes and willowy heroines in a more genteel age.

Her grandfather had come in when the bedroom was finished, his eyes rolling with bemused tolerance. 'Well, as long as *you're* happy with it, Juliet.'

He hadn't paid many visits after that. Not that she minded him. But it was delicious to be left alone, privacy still seemed a bit of a novelty. Her security hardline bodyguards accompanied her everywhere outside the mansion; not nudging her shoulder, they were too professional for that, but always close, always watching. And once inside Wilholm's 'ware-saturated perimeter nothing went unseen.

Some part of Julia's nature rebelled against being a cosseted princess, treated like some immensely precious and delicate work of art. Yes, she was valuable, but not fragile. However, there were subtle ways to defy the surveillance, to indulge herself without suffering the silent censure of the hardliners' ever-vigilant eyes, keeping some little core of personality secret to herself.

Open Channel to Manor Security Core. The 'ware came on line, a colourless menu of surveillance circuits and defence gear streaming into her mind, all of it listed as restricted. She fed her executive code in, and every restriction was lifted.

Access Surveillance Camera: West Wing, First-Floor Corridor. Route Image Into Bedroom Three.

She rolled over and rested her chin in her hands, legs waving idly. A picture formed on the theatre-sized wall-mounted flatscreen opposite the bed. It showed the corridor outside, a slightly fuzzy resolution. Adrian was walking down the thick strip of navy-blue carpeting, dressed in a long burgundy towelling robe. Barefoot, she noted, and no pyjama trousers either.

Peeping Tom, her mind chided. Her cheeks were suddenly very warm against her palms, but Pandora's box was open now.

Adrian stopped outside one of the bedroom doors, and looked furtively both ways along the corridor before opening the door without knocking.

For one glorious instant Julia allowed herself to believe it was her bedroom he'd entered, even twisting round to look. But of course her door was closed.

Access Surveillance Camera: West Wing, Guest Suite Seven.

Katerina's room, bathed in a musky green light. Now here was something very interesting. By day it was Adrian who took charge of

their little group; Julia and Katerina listened to him, laughed at his jokes, followed him when he wanted to go swimming, or horse riding, or playing tennis. But here in private the roles were reversed, Adrian did as Kats told him.

Julia studied her girl friend as best as the irritatingly grainy image allowed. Kats had lost some of her youthful daytime frivolity, becoming imperious, a confidence verging on arrogance.

Open Memory File, Code: AmourKats.

So she could retain all the impressions she saw on the big screen, and then retrieve them at any time for future consideration. AmourKats was going to be an objective study in seduction.

Kats was kneeling on her bed as Adrian came in, dressed in a provocative taupe-coloured silk camisole top and a short waist slip, blonde hair bubbling down around her shoulders. A reallife sex kitten. She told Adrian to take his robe off.

It was more like an order, Julia thought. Her heart leapt at the prospect of seeing Adrian naked at last, jealous and excited. Seeing him in his swimming trunks all afternoon had been a real treat.

Adrian was nineteen years old, ruggedly handsome, and possessed of a truly heavenly physique, each muscle perfectly proportioned, nothing like the ugly excess of a body-builder, just naturally lean. **Mesomorph**, her implant dictionary subsection told her.

The towelling robe formed a dark puddle around Adrian's feet.

Julia slowly turned on to her side, looking away from the flatscreen; shame finally overpowering greed.

Exit Surveillance Camera.

Adrian had been so nice to her, treating her no differently than he did Kats during the day as the three of them roamed Wilholm's vast grounds. She'd really hoped the attraction was mutual this time. She never seemed to be able to attract, much less hold, a boy as desirable as Adrian.

The memory of Primate Marcus, leader of the First Salvation Church, floated out of that little dark core of anguish to haunt her once more. He'd favoured her mother for several months when Julia had been eight. The patronage had enabled her to walk like a queen through the desert commune's airy underground tunnels, the happiest time of her young life. Daughter of the Primate's chosen one.

Primate Marcus was an obese fifty-year-old, wrapped in a huge toga to hide his slovenly frame. With her eyes closed she saw the big round head with its full grey beard leaning down towards her. Fat fingers adorned with gold rings tickled her ribs, and she shrieked her joy. The air had been thick and sweet from his marijuana. 'One day soon, I'll fill you with Jesuslove,' his slurred voice rumbled.

She had laughed then. Shuddered now.

But then, she thought miserably, that was always the way when it came to men – boys. She just never seemed to have any luck. So far they had fallen into two categories; the first she hadn't even believed existed until afterwards. More handsome than Adrian, wittier than a channel comedian, with the culture and manners of a Royal. But most of them had no real money – executive assistants, flavour-of-the-month artists, impoverished aristocracy, men who could make deals to retire on if they just had backing. They haunted the fringes of society, sharks who homed in on her name, her money like fresh meat, which in a way she was. She had been too young, too stupidly blind with the whirlwind of holiday romance. And in bed his immaculate body had made her scream out in glory. Only afterwards did she find out she was simply part of his grand scheme.

She had fled from one extreme to the other. Back to her exclusive Swiss school, and into Joel's arms, a boarder at the boys' school down the road. He was the same age as her, the sensitive type, mild-mannered, caring, just perfect for a true first love, she knew he would never exploit her. And in bed he was an utter disaster; she would lie in his twitchy embrace and remember how sensational sex could be. Thankfully it had fizzled out soon enough, her leaving her school, him returning to France, neither making much effort to keep in touch.

The soul-bruising knocks and disappointments had set up a barrier, a psychological flinch. And the boys seemed aware of her mistrust, finding it difficult to breach. Anyone who could was too smooth, those that couldn't would be like Joel. What she wanted more than anything was one good-looking boy who didn't know who she was to look at her and think: yeah!

Then Kats had come to stay at Wilholm, injecting some much-needed laughter to the long procession of warm, wet, boring days; and she'd brought Adrian with her. Adrian: who fitted the bill as though he had been born for her, mature, athletic, no doubt very experienced in bed, fun, intelligent, not at all arrogant. And when he had smiled and said hello there had been no barrier, no hesitancy at all. It would've been utterly sensational, if Kats hadn't enchanted him first.

Julia shivered slightly at the involuntary recollection of Primate Marcus and the cult. She'd been ten when the upheaval came, the big Texan, known later as Uncle Horace, had arrived to take her away. Over the sea to a near-mythical Europe and a grandfather she'd never even known she had. Lady Fauntleroy, the other commune kids had teased before she went, bowing, curtseying. She'd giggled with them, playing along, secretly terrified of leaving the gently curving sandstone passages with their broad light-wells and the eternal magnificent desert above. Her mother had stayed with the cult, her father had accompanied her.

The bioware processors helped Julia suppress the name, the whole concept of *father*, pushing him below conscious examination, a fast, clean exorcism. He brought too much pain. Childhood ignorance was a blissful existence, she reflected.

Europe and Philip Evans, her grandfather; and the astonishing revelation of Event Horizon. A company to rival a *kombinate* in size, heroically battling the British PSP, which surely made Grandpa a saint. Socialism was the ultimate Antichrist.

Her grandfather had sent her to the school in Switzerland, where starchy tutors had crammed her with company law, management procedures, finance; twittery *grande dames* teaching her all the social graces, etiquette and deportment, refining her. She'd dropped her American accent, adopting a crystal-cut English Sloane inflection to lend a touch of class. A proper Lady. Then on her sixteenth birthday she'd left the school and spent a month in Event Horizon's ultra-exclusive Austrian clinic.

She was given five bioware implants, nodes of ferredoxin protein meshed with her synaptic clefts: three memory-cell clusters, two data processors; a whole subsidiary brain to cope with the vast dataflows generated by Event Horizon. The parallel mentality didn't make her a genius, but it did make her analytical, objective. A conflation of logic and human inspiration, she was capable of looking at a problem from every conceivable angle until she produced a solution. An irrational computer.

'It's the only way, Juliet,' Philip had told her. 'I'm losing track of the company, it's slipping away from me. All I ever get to see in cubes are the summaries of summaries, a shallow overview. That's not enough. Inertia and waste are building up. Inevitably, I suppose. Department heads just don't have the drive. It's a job to them, not a life. Maybe these nodes will enable you to control it properly.'

Julia let desire war with her conscience. How did you captivate a boy like Adrian?

Access Surveillance Camera: West Wing, Guest Suite Seven.

A laughing Kats was straddling Adrian, playing with him, her hands caressing, tongue working slowly down his chest. He was spreadeagled across the mattress, clutching the brass bedposts with a strength which came close to bending them, face warped in agony and ecstasy, pleading with her.

Commit AmourKats.

Julia had never done anything like this, not leading, not making all the moves. She wasn't sure she would have the nerve. Kats seemed so totally uninhibited. Shameless. Was that the key? Could boys home in on abandon? Kats sat back on Adrian's abdomen, then crossed her arms and gripped the hem of the camisole. She peeled it languidly

over her head, shaking her hair out. Julia felt a sharp spasm of envy at seeing her friend's well-developed body. That was one reason why Kats had Adrian, she acknowledged bitterly, they looked like godlings together. At least she had longer legs than Kats. Skinny, though; nothing like as shapely, two beanpoles really.

Exit Surveillance Camera.

Her mental yell was contaminated with anger and disgust. Peeking on the lovers had seemed like a piece of harmless fun. Certainly using the security cameras to spy on the manor's servants had been pretty enlightening. But this wasn't the gentle romantic love-making she'd been expecting. Nothing near.

Pandora's box. And only a fool ever opens it.

Anger vanished to be replaced with sadness. Alone again, more than ever now she knew the truth.

Boys were just about the only subject she never discussed with her grandfather. It never seemed fair somehow. He'd taken over every other parental duty, a solid pillar of comfort, support, and love. She couldn't burden him with more. Not now. *Certainly* not now.

Part of the reason for her being at Wilholm was so she could be his secretary. Philip Evans needed a secretary like he needed another overdraft, but the idea was to give her executive experience and acquaint her with Event Horizon minutiae, preparing her to take it over. A terrifying, yet at the same time exhilarating prospect.

Then this morning at breakfast he'd taken her into his confidence, looking even more haggard than usual. 'Someone is running a spoiler operation against Event Horizon,' he'd said. 'Contaminating thirty-seven per cent of our memox crystals in the furnaces.'

'Has Walshaw found out who was behind it?' she'd asked, assuming she was being told after the security chief had closed down the operation. It was the way their discussions of the company usually went. Her grandfather would explain a recent problem, and they'd go over the solution, detail by detail, until she understood why it'd been handled that particular way. Remote hands-on training, he'd joked.

'Walshaw doesn't know about this,' Philip Evans had answered grimly. 'Nobody knows apart from me. I noticed our cash reserves had fallen pretty drastically in the last quarterly financial summaries. Forty-eight million Eurofrancs down, Juliet, that's fifty-seven million New Sterling for Christ's sake. Our entire reserve is only nine hundred million Eurofrancs. So I started checking. The money is being used to cover a deficit from the microgee crystal furnaces up at Zanthus. Standard accounting procedure; the loss was passed on to the finance division to make good for our loan-repayment schedule. They're just doing their job. The responsibility lies with the microgee division, and they've done bugger all about it.'

She'd frowned, bewildered. 'But surely someone in the microgee division should've spotted it? Thirty-seven per cent! What about the security monitors?'

'Nothing. They didn't trip. According to the data squirt from Zanthus, that thirty-seven per cent is coming out of the furnace as just so much rubbish, riddled with impurities. They've written it off as a normal operational loss. And that is pure bollocks. The furnaces weren't performing that badly at start-up, and we're way down the learning curve now. A worst-case scenario should see a five per cent loss. I checked with the Boeing Marietta consortium which builds the furnaces, no one else is suffering that kind of reject rate. Most of 'em have losses below two per cent.'

The full realization struck her then. 'We can't trust security?'

'God knows, Juliet. I'm praying that some smartarse hotrod has found a method of cracking the monitor's access codes, however unlikely that is. The alternative is bad.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Sit and think. They've been gnawing away at us for eight bloody months, a few more days won't kill us. But we're taking a quarter of a million Eurofranc loss per day, it's got to stop, and stop dead. I have to know the people I put on it are reliable.'

They couldn't afford major losses, Julia knew. Philip Evans's post-Second Restoration expansion plans were stretching the company's resources to breaking point. Microgee products were the most profitable of all Event Horizon's gear, but the space station modules tied up vast sums of capital; even with the Sanger spaceplanes, reaching orbit was still phenomenally expensive. They needed the income from the memox crystals to keep up the payments to the company's financial backing consortium.

The fact that he'd admitted the problem to her and her alone had brought a wonderful sensation of contentment. They'd always been close, but this made the bond unbreakable. She was the only person he could really trust in the whole world. And that was just a little bit scary.

She'd promised faithfully to run an analysis of the security monitor programs through her nodes for him, to see if the codes could be cracked, or maybe subverted. But she'd delayed it while she went horse riding with Adrian and Kats, then again as the three of them went swimming, and now subverting the manor's security circuits.

Guilt added itself to the shame she was already feeling from spying on the lovers. She'd been appallingly selfish, allowing a juvenile infatuation to distract her. Betraying Grandpa's trust.

Access High Steal.

Sight, sound, and sensation fell away, isolating her at the centre

of a null void. Numbers filled her mind, nothing like a cube display, no coloured numerals; this was elemental maths, raw digits. The processor nodes obediently slotted them into a logic matrix, a three-dimensional lattice with data packages on top, filtering through a dizzy topography of interactive channels that correlated and cross-indexed. Hopefully the answer should pop out of the bottom.

She thought for a moment, defining the parameters of the matrix channels, allowing ideas to form, merge. Any ideas, however wild. Some fruiting, some withering. Irrational. Assume the monitors are unbreakable: how would I go about concealing the loss? An inverted problem, outside normal computer logic, its factors too random. Her processor nodes loaded the results into the channel structures.

The columns of numbers started to flow. She began to inject tracer programs, adding modifications as she went, probing for weak points.

Some deep level of her brain admitted that the metaphysical matrix frightened her, an eerie sense of trepidation at its inhuman nature. She feared herself, what she'd become. Was that why people kept their distance? Could they tell she was different somehow? An instinctive phobia.

She cursed the bioware.

* * *

Philip Evans's scowling face filled her bedside phone screen. 'Juliet?' The scowl faded. 'For God's sake, girl, it's past midnight.'

He looked so terribly fragile, she thought, worse than ever. She kept her roguish smile firmly in place – school discipline, thank heavens. 'So what are you doing up, then?'

'You bloody well know what I'm doing, girl.'

'Yah, me too. Listen, I think I've managed to clear security over the monitor programs.'

He leaned in towards the screen, eyes questing. 'How?'

'Well, the top rankers anyway,' she conceded. 'We make eighteen different products up at Zanthus, and each of the microgee production modules squirts its data to the control centre in the dormitory. Now the control-centre 'ware processes the data before it enters the company data net so that the relevant divisions only get the data they need – maintenance requirements to procurement, consumables to logistics, and performance figures to finance. But the security monitoring is actually done up at Zanthus, with the raw data. And that's where the monitor programs have been circumvented, they haven't been altered at all.'

‘Circumvented how?’

‘By destreaming the data squirts from the microgee modules, lumping them all together. The monitors are programmed to trip when production losses rise above fourteen per cent, anything below that is considered a maintenance problem. At the moment the total loss of our combined orbital production is thirteen point two per cent, so no alarm.’

Julia watched her grandpa run a hand across his brow. ‘Juliet, you’re an angel.’

She said nothing, grinning stupidly into the screen, feeling just great.

‘I mean it,’ he said.

Embarrassed in the best possible way, she shrugged. ‘Just a question of programming, all that expensive education you gave me. Anybody else could’ve done it. What will you do now?’

‘Do you know who authorized the destreaming?’

‘No, sorry. It began nine months ago, listed as part of one of our famous simplification/economy drives.’

‘Can you find out?’

‘Tricky. However, I checked with personnel, and none of the Zanthus managers have left in the last year, so whoever the culprit is, they’re still with us. Three options. I can try and worm my way into Zanthus’s ’ware and see if they left any traces, like which terminal it was loaded from, whose access card was used, that kind of thing. Or I could go up to Zanthus and freeze their records.’

No way, Juliet,’ he said tenderly. ‘Sorry.’

‘Thought so. The last resort would be to use our executive code to dump Zanthus’s entire data core into the security division’s storage facility, and run through the records there. The trouble with that is that everyone would know it’s been done.’

‘And the culprit would do a bunk,’ he concluded for her. ‘Yes. So that leaves us with breaking into Zanthus. Bloody wonderful, cracking my own ’ware. So tell me why this absolves the top rankers?’

‘It doesn’t remove them from suspicion altogether, it just means they aren’t the prime suspects any more, now we know the monitor codes weren’t compromised. Whether security personnel are involved or not depends on how good the original vetting system is. Certainly someone intimate with our data-handling procedures is guilty.’

‘That doesn’t surprise me. There’s always rotten apples, Juliet, remember that. All you can ever do is hope to exclude them from achieving top-rank positions.’

‘What will you do now?’

The hand massaged his brow again. ‘Tell Walshaw, for a start. If we can’t trust him then we may as well pack up today. After that I’ll

bring in an independent, get him to check this mess out for me – security, Zanthus management, the memox-furnace operators, the whole bloody lot of them.'

'What sort of independent?'

He grinned. 'Work that out for yourself, Juliet. Management exercise.'

'How many guesses?' she shot back, delighted. He was always challenging her like this. Testing.

'Three.'

'Cruel.'

'Good night, Juliet. Sweet dreams.'

'Love you, Grandee.'

He kissed two fingers, transferring it to the screen. Her fingers pressed urgently against his, the touch of cold glass, hard. His face faded to slate grey.

Julia pulled the sheet over herself, turning off the brass swan wall-lights. She hugged her chest in the warm darkness; elated, far too alert for sleep to claim her.

Access Surveillance Camera: West Wing, Guest Suite Seven.

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